

"Yes, they dropped the bombs. But it's not me that did it. I was a third-generation American."

Hatsue Okamoto, 83, Japanese-American interned, Vancouver resident

# The 'enemy' within

At 17, she was considered a threat to national security and interned by the United States along with thousands of fellow Americans



Once considered a threat to U.S. national security, Hatsue Okamoto now lives in a Fisher's Landing assisted-living center. A high school student in San Francisco when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, she was immediately confined to Japan Town, then sent to Topaz Internment Camp in Utah for more than two years.

ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

## Did you know?

■ The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II today is considered one of the worst violations of civil rights in U.S. history.

■ The government and the U.S. Army, citing "military necessity," looked up more than 110,000 men, women, and children in 10 remote camps.

■ The persons were never convicted or even charged with any crime, yet were held for up to four years in camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards.

## If you go

■ **What:** Tea honoring Hatsue Okamoto. She'll tell of her life in Topaz Internment Camp during World War II.

■ **When:** 2 p.m. today.

■ **Where:** Lexington House, 2810 S.E. 164th Ave.

■ **Cost:** Free, open to the public.

■ **Information:** Call Donna Smith, 360-697-1125.

## Vancouver resident spent much of World War II in internment camp

By DEAN BAKER  
Columbian staff writer

She was an all-American teenager attending church in San Francisco that Sunday morning 66 years ago when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

For Hatsue Kuwada Okamoto, Dec. 7, 1941, is a date that lives in infamy. It took away her rights as a citizen and changed her life.

Born of Japanese ancestry and raised in Hawaii, she had heard of Pearl Harbor, but she hadn't been there. Yet, by April 1942, she and her aunt and two cousins were confined to a barracks at Tanforan Race Track, south of Daly City, Calif. Within



Hatsue Okamoto stands outside her barracks home at Topaz Internment Camp near Delta, Utah, in 1943. Born in Hawaii, Okamoto was detained in Utah during World War II.

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## Internment:

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a few months, she and 9,000 other Japanese-Americans were detained in Topaz Internment Camp near Delta, Utah. Atypical high school kid, suddenly she was seen as a threat to American security, even though she and most others were American citizens with little or no contact with Japan or even knowledge of the Japanese language.

"I wasn't angry," Okamoto, 83, said Tuesday, sitting in a comfortable chair beside her walker in a Fisher's Landing assisted living apartment where she has lived for seven years.

"I was kinda upset. Yes, they dropped the bombs. But it's not me that did it. I was a third-generation American."

Both of her parents were born in Hawaii. She was born on Maui and grew up and went through eighth grade on Lanai, where her dad grew pineapple for Hale.

In 1941, she was 17 and her parents had sent her to live with her aunt and uncle in San Francisco and attend high school. Her uncle, a teacher at a San Francisco Japanese school, was seized by the FBI on Pearl Harbor day, just before she returned home from church. She didn't see him again for nearly four years.

She found herself caring for two children who lived upstairs from her in San Francisco's Japan Town. Their mother was dead, and their father was taken away by the FBI.

The rest of her family, her mother and father and her brothers and sisters — all U.S. citizens, born in Hawaii — were left free in Hawaii during the war.

"There were so many Japanese in Hawaii, they couldn't be executed," she said, with a wide smile. "They were farming. Nothing there would have worked."

The day after the Pearl Harbor attack, there was an assembly at Okamoto's school. The students listened to President Roosevelt speak of Japan's "sudden and deliberate attack," which killed 2,333 Americans and injured 1,139. Congress declared war on Japan.

Okamoto and her Japanese-American neighbors immediately were forbidden to leave Japan Town. She couldn't attend school outside the area. Military patrolled the streets. A few months later, she and hundreds of others were bused to the Daly City race track where they stayed in barracks and stables for a couple of months.

## Heavy shoes

Then, they were told "to buy high boots because we might go to a place where there were scorpions."

They were told to take one suitcase, nothing else. They were loaded on a train filled with military police, shades drawn, bound for a destination they didn't know. The darkened train pulled into Delta, Utah. The shades went up, and Okamoto saw the desert: "No trees, only sage brush blowing and bare ground," she said.

"But close to the mountains and barbed wire fence, one mile square. So we were given an ID number, and there were no names, and we were told to

go by the ID number."

She paused, and smiled. "I don't remember mine," she said with a hint of sarcasm and pride.

There in the Utah desert, Okamoto made the most of life in a tiny apartment with her aunt and two cousins, sharing a mess hall, showers and latrines with dozens of others, fearing the military police guards, and staying warm in the winter around a pot-bellied stove.

"Even in the snow, we had to go out to the latrine, and we just had that stove to feed with coal. But we were young," she said.

"What about the old people?" she asked rhetorically. They

didn't fare so well. One dead old man, she said, was shot dead by an MP when he failed to hear the soldier's warning and didn't stop walking as he was told.

"We were issued an army cot and mattress and one blanket. The winters were very cold with lots of snow, and the summers were hot."

She took a job working as an aid in the internment camp hospital for \$19 a month.

The food "was bad," she said, seeming sorry to be critical. It got better when more U.S. soldiers arrived, she said.

## Dances and jewelry

She and other teens had dances, collected topaz near the

camp and made jewelry, taught each other to read and write.

When the FBI released them after the war, she and five other nurses' aides took the \$25 and train fare they were given to go home, and instead rode the train to New York. They lived in the YMCA and got jobs in the Mount Sinai Hospital.

Late in 1945, she returned to Hawaii, saw her family, and met and married farmer Kaoru Okamoto the next year. They raised five children: Beth, 58, now of Vancouver; Lynn, 61, of Everett; Cheryl, 58, of Louisville, Ky.; Craig, 54, and Alvin, 54, both of Hawaii. Alvin served in the Marine Corps. Craig served in the Army in Vietnam.

After her husband died in 1969, she moved to the area to be with her son, married a registered nurse and worked in a hospital and an assisted-living center before she turned 73 years ago and moved to Vancouver.

She never told her children about the internment camp when they were young. They didn't know about it until recently, she said.

"I never said anything about it," she said. "I just wanted to forget about it."

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DEAN BAKER writes about military history. Reach him at 360-759-8009 or e-mail dean.baker@columbian.com.

## Pearl Harbor survivors hold on to history

By H.G. REZA  
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — Their ranks thinned by age, Pearl Harbor veterans today are commemorating the 66th anniversary of the Japanese attack and wondering if Americans will remember one of the most defining moments in U.S. history

after they die. "When we're gone, we're gone," said Jack Ray Hammett, 87. "We're already just a paragraph in the history books. Will even that disappear when the last one of us dies?"

President Roosevelt, in a speech to Congress, immortalized the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and other military installations on Oahu, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941, as a "date which will live in infamy." Today, those words are remembered mostly by the generation that lived through and fought in World War II.

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